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DE RUEHLB #3619/01 3181447

ZNY SSSS ZZH

P 141447Z NOV 06

FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6451

INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE

RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE

RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 0515

RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 003619

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/09/2016

TAGS: PGOV KCRM MARR MAS PREL PTER SY LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: DEFMIN ON LAF STABILITY, CHANGES UNDER A NEW CABINET, TRIBUNAL

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Sections 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶11. (S) In a meeting with visiting Assistant Secretary of Defense Rodman, Lebanese Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Murr expressed appreciation for continued U.S. support for the LAF, and hoped that such support would continue in the form of light materiel to be used in the LAF's daily operations. The LAF is an important source for stability in Lebanon and in the region, and should be an important bilateral partner in counter-terrorism. The LAF will retain control of its troops and equipment but its counter-terrorism policy and aid relationships will probably change if the March 8 coalition gets a blocking minority in the cabinet. Additional communications equipment assistance might improve LAF and UNIFIL interoperability. In terms of Lebanon's domestic political developments, Murr reported that national consultations will resume for a final day on November 11. He remarked that it would be best to have a decision on the international tribunal before then if at all possible. End Summary.

APPRECIATION FOR U.S. SUPPORT

¶12. (C) Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Peter Rodman met with Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Elias Murr on November 9, just in advance of the signing of a bilateral assistance agreement providing USD 10 million worth of equipment to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). Murr expressed appreciation for Rodman's visit at such a sensitive time in Lebanon, and for the continuity of U.S. support for the LAF despite changes in Lebanese governments. By contrast, some of Lebanon's European friends have a less predictable level of support or aid only for the Internal Security Forces (ISF). Nevertheless, the Europeans expect the LAF to step in during periods of instability or on counter-terrorism issues that might otherwise be handled by the ISF.

¶13. A/S Rodman reiterated the bipartisan basis of U.S. support for the LAF and for a sovereign, democratic, peaceful Lebanon. He explained that the Department of Defense's long-term assessment called for the U.S. to contribute to future LAF reforms. He reminded Murr of U.S. efforts to encourage Arab and European allies to increase their support as well. Murr made a plea for continued bilateral assistance to the LAF, arguing that without the LAF, Lebanon could collapse into pieces "like a little Iraq," and thus not be

able to be to serve as a symbol of democracy for the region.

¶4. (S/NF) Murr declared that the LAF needs a strong message of support from the United States in the form of light materiel that can be seen and used on a daily basis. More "morale building equipment" such as the HMMWVs, due to arrive in December, can be seen by the Lebanese people on a daily basis and help the 14,000 LAF special forces conduct patrols.

Terrorism will continue to be a problem in Lebanon and the region, and thus counter-terrorism will remain an important area for bilateral cooperation. The LAF "strike force," which has a deep relationship with the U.S. in strategic counter-terrorism operations, is held back by old equipment and civilian cars.

COMMAND AND CONTROL OF THE LAF

¶5. (C) Asking about the danger of LAF property falling into the wrong hands, Murr explained that the LAF has a good track record in retaining command and control of its personnel and arms, even in the event of civil wars and changes in government. Under Murr, the LAF has limited the role of Shia in its forces to preserve stability in the event of internal problems. The LAF has decreased the Shia participation from over 50 percent to just 16 percent through recruiting non-Shia soldiers. The LAF has retained control of its materiel throughout its history, without losing equipment to domestic or foreign militants. (Comment: While Murr has indeed focused on recruitment to lower the Shia percentage of the army, we find both sides of his equation to be exaggerated. The real figures probably show something in the range of a drop of 40 to 30 percent Shia. End comment.)

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¶6. (C) The LAF's counter-terrorism policy and aid relationships, however, would probably change if the March 8 coalition were to win a blocking minority in the Lebanese cabinet, as they are seeking. More broadly, Murr believes that an expanded cabinet with a March 8 blocking minority would present many problems. Such a cabinet might block the UN-sponsored international tribunal to try Hariri's assassins, and it could oppose certain helpful operations under UNSCR 1701. A blocking minority could have a direct and unhelpful impact on decision on the election of the next president, and it could impede certain kinds of international aid to Lebanon. For that reason, Murr argued, Lebanon needs U.S. pressure on the Saudis, Egyptians, and others who might influence Syria and its allies inside Lebanon to stop their interference.

¶7. (C) Murr, in response to a request for ideas for additional U.S. aid to increase interoperability particularly with UNIFIL, identified communications equipment as an area where new equipment could help. Communications are going well under the current, non-secure technology but better and faster systems could increase efficiency. LAF deployment in the south is progressing "perfectly," with the LAF and UNIFIL working "like a single army" and LAF officers inside the UNIFIL operations room. There have been no conflicts between the two forces in the south, at sea, or on the border with Syria, he said.

TRIBUNAL AND OTHER CONCERNS

¶7. (S) Murr received a call during the bilateral assistance signing ceremony -- and immediately translated the message for his guests: it was an update on the decision to adjourn the national political consultations until November 11, which would be the last day for the consultations. It would be best to have a decision on the UN Independent International Investigation Commission tribunal, a controversial political issue, before November 11 if at all possible, he remarked.

¶8. (U) Press questions after the signing ceremony focused on whether the agreement or bilateral cooperation would be affected by the mid-term congressional elections in the U.S. or a potential change in government in Lebanon, and whether U.S. aid to Lebanon might ever approach the quantity of U.S. aid to Israel.

FELTMAN